

Judge Removed From Case of King's Convicted Killer

APR 31 8 98
Associated Press

MEMPHIS—A judge whose rulings gave James Earl Ray hope that he would get a trial in the assassination of civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. has been removed from the case for appearing biased toward the convicted killer.

During the past four years, Criminal Court Judge Joe Brown has ruled on various petitions filed by Ray in his decades-old attempt to retract his guilty plea to killing King in Memphis in 1968.

Prosecutors contend Brown re-

peatedly has gone beyond the narrow legal questions raised in Ray's petitions, and on Friday the state Court of Criminal Appeals agreed. Comments Brown made in newspaper and television interviews gave the appearance of bias against prosecutors, the court said.

Prosecutor John Campbell said the decision supports his assertion that Brown "has lost his impartiality."

Ray has two months to appeal the decision to the state Supreme Court, he said.

Brown was out of his office, and

a secretary said he was unavailable to comment.

Ray, who is serving a 99-year prison sentence, was captured in England four months after King's slaying.

He entered his guilty plea in 1969 but almost immediately began trying to take it back.

Ray, 69, suffers from terminal liver disease, and his failing health has added urgency for supporters who want him to go to trial. Ray contends he was set up by other conspirators to take the blame for the murder.